

The Need Is Now: University Engagement in Regional Economic Development

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Abstract

At a time when many regions are grappling with economic challenges and universities are struggling to demonstrate their public value, the question of how regions and universities might partner effectively begs to be addressed. This qualitative case study examines the engagement of six land-grant institutions in regions not proximate to their campuses. The engagement activities associated with these partnerships center on economic and community development. Characterizations of the university-regional partnerships studied are provided. The institutional perspectives of these six university pioneers in “distributed regional engagement” are also presented. The article includes notable strengths of each engagement approach that commend it to others as a model and concludes with several meta-lessons gleaned from the research.

Introduction

The notion that universities are critical ingredients in creating and maintaining economic well-being is integral to Americans’ understanding of higher education’s role in society. Universities have long embraced the mission of addressing the needs of citizenry at large and have been publicly funded for this purpose. Yet in recent years, public dissatisfaction with universities’ lack of focus on serving “the public good” has increased and, correspondingly, state support for higher education has declined (*Longanecker 2005*). Perhaps, as the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (*1999*) has surmised, we in higher education have not engaged effectively with the complex challenges and opportunities faced by citizens and communities:

One challenge we face is growing public frustration with what is seen to be our unresponsiveness. At the root of the criticism is a perception that we are out of touch and out of date. Another part of the issue is that although society has problems, our institutions have “disciplines.” In the end, what these complaints add up to is a perception that, despite the resources and expertise

available on our campuses, our institutions are not well organized to bring them to bear on local problems in a coherent way. (*Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities 1999*)

Among higher education institutions, land-grant universities have not only an obligation to address economic and social needs broadly, but have a particular responsibility to interface with the needs of the citizens and communities throughout the states in which they are situated. This article is drawn from a doctoral dissertation study of how land-grant institutions are engaging with regions of their states distant from campus in ways that contribute to the development and well-being of those regions.

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Many higher education institutions have established productive relationships with the regions in which they are situated. These relationships have engaged students, faculty, and administrators in addressing community challenges through research, education, and public service activities. The net result has been closer town-gown relationships, improved quality

of life in the community, applied learning opportunities for students, and satisfaction for faculty members interested in experiencing tangible impacts of their scholarly work.

A few universities have committed themselves to broad-scale engagement with geographically distant regions. Such “distributed” engagement that addresses complex issues over an extended period of time and involves multiple university players across departments and disciplines is still relatively rare. By learning from these pioneers, university faculty and administrators, regional leaders, and policymakers can develop frameworks and tools to increase the capacity and success of distributed regional university engagement.

Background

The public good

The roots of engagement in the United States date back to the Colonial Era, when colleges were established to prepare citizens

for public service (*Thelin 2004*). Subsequently, through the Morrill Act of 1862, federal government policy linked higher education to utilitarian concerns associated with expanding the economy. This was followed by midwestern progressivism in the early twentieth century, which led to the development of “The Wisconsin Idea,” partnering higher education, through the land-grant university, with state needs (*Stark 1995*). Through a complex set of federal and state policies coupled with historic expectations associated with higher education’s mission, land-grant institutions came to exemplify higher education’s commitment to the public good.

Today, the United States finds itself, along with the rest of the world, in the midst of a large-scale economic transformation. This economic sea change is propelling some regions to new levels of prosperity, but is leaving many regions, particularly rural and semirural regions, far behind. What role can and should higher education, and land-grant universities in particular, play in assisting economically distressed regions? How might such regions, particularly those that are not proximate to a research university, gain a foothold in the new economic environment? How can partnerships with economically distressed, geographically distant regions be structured such that universities can meet their own needs while benefiting the regions?

Innovation economy capacity-building

Every state has key assets that are engines of innovation (research) and intellectual capital development (education)—its public universities. Every state has at least one land-grant university, and many states have additional public research and comprehensive universities. Land-grant and research universities have the research expertise, the laboratories and physical infrastructure, and the administrative know-how to support and sustain robust research. The challenge, however, is that the economic impact of research and development is only felt within a commuting distance of where the money is spent (*Kirchhoff et al. 2002*). Regions without research universities thus do not directly benefit from these engines of innovation.

Similarly, every state has public institutions of higher education that offer baccalaureate and graduate programs of study. These programs both attract and develop intellectual talent. To the extent that these institutions prepare scientists, engineers, and technologists, they are wellsprings of the most highly prized intellectual capital in the knowledge-based economy (*National Center on Education and the Economy 2007*). The trick is to create enough “stickiness”

so that this human capital chooses to remain in place once their formal education period is complete. Regions without institutions of higher education are particularly challenged to attract this talent and have it remain there.

University-community partnerships

Ramaley (2007) points out that the complexities of the world in which we live necessarily focus on the development and long-term maintenance of partnerships and collaborations. She suggests that these partnerships should be rooted in creating “regions of innovation” as coined in the National Governors Association Innovation America prospectus: “To create regions of innovation, we need to link our educational systems (both K-12 and postsecondary) to resources in the community to address both workforce development and economic and community development” (17).

An important concept in structuring effective higher education partnerships with communities is creating a situation that will benefit all of the partners. “[I]nstitutions of higher education . . . are all searching for the win/win situation, in which the mission of their institution is being met through the process of partnering with local communities” (Maurrasse 2001, 182). Different institutions have different strengths as well, so it is important to find effective ways to engage institutions synergistically with their assets and interests.

Methodology

Rationale for qualitative case study approach

A qualitative case study methodology was employed in this dissertation research to investigate land-grant university partnerships with nonlocal regions focused on economic and community development (Franklin 2008). According to Creswell (2005), qualitative methodologies are appropriate when little is known about a phenomenon and there is a need to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Since few examples exist of land-grant engagement in distributed regional development, and virtually no literature addresses this particular subject, there is a need to learn about the critical variables in such partnerships from those who have been involved in them.

By examining distributed engagement in various contexts, the study offered opportunities to learn how different circumstances and personalities can contribute to productive partnerships. This research provided insights into multiple constructions of university-

regional partnerships, adding to the current understanding of partnerships, critical variables associated with university engagement success, and policy approaches to structuring university-regional partnerships.

The research associated with this dissertation was conducted in three stages. The first stage of research focused on characterizing distributed regional engagement by gleaning basic information from six institutions about the interests of universities in engaging with nonlocal regions, the university leadership associated with such partnership efforts, and the challenges encountered in pursuing regional engagement. In the second stage of research, two distributed university-regional partnerships were examined in depth through conversations with key faculty members and administrators, as well as with public and private sector community leaders associated with them. A final stage of research targeted state policy considerations associated with university engagement in regional development through interviews with state higher education and technology development policy leaders.

The information presented in this article is drawn from the first stage of dissertation research, as described above. It examines models of distributed regional engagement associated with six land-grant institutions: Michigan State University, Purdue University, the University of Georgia, the University of Minnesota, the University of Missouri, and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech). The focus of the research is on the universities' rationales for and constructs of engagement, the leadership of outreach and engagement at the universities, examples of distributed engagement activities, the universities' contributions to regional development, and the challenges associated with engagement.

Site selection

Several criteria were used to select the universities included in the study. A first consideration was to reduce the number of variables by selecting universities that were similar in mission. Land-grant institutions were chosen since their mission aligns with engagement that extends beyond the local campus region. Land-grant universities involved in one or more partnerships with regions sixty or more miles from the universities' main campuses constituted a second selection factor. Third, university engagement partnerships focused on economic and community capacity development were considered. Examples of engagement that involved multiple university disciplines and departments constituted a

fourth selection factor. Fifth, evidence of faculty member involvement in the partnerships was a determining factor. A sixth selection factor entailed the identification of engagement partnerships that had been in place for at least two years. A final consideration for inclusion was partnering not centered in regional university branch campuses.

Interviewee selection

Two informants from each institution (with one exception) were interviewed. The first interview was conducted with someone who was personally knowledgeable about the university's regional partnerships. The focus of these interviews was fact-finding regarding the nature and scope of the universities' regional partnerships. The information gleaned from these interviews aided the interviewer in identifying qualifying examples of distributed engagement and provided a solid basis of fact-oriented information on which to base subsequent formal interviews.

Formal interviews were conducted with the chief engagement officer at each of the six institutions, except the University of Minnesota, which was in the midst of a search process for a chief engagement officer during the research period. The chief engagement officers interviewed were the individuals who carried primary institutional responsibility for the university's engagement activities, typically called a vice provost for engagement, vice provost for outreach, or vice provost for extension.

Documents

Electronic and hard copy documents were consulted as part of the research. The information in these documents was utilized to provide additional information pertinent to the research as well as to triangulate interview data. Materials were obtained directly from interviewees as well as through Web sites associated with the universities, the regions, and the states included in the research. The vast majority of the collateral documentation analyzed contained public domain information.

Characterizing Distributed Regional Engagement at Six Institutions

Evidence (or lack thereof) suggests that distributed regional engagement is a relatively new but growing phenomenon. An analysis of the six land-grant institutions practicing distributed engagement in this study provides an opportunity to examine the similarities and differences between the various approaches as well as to identify particular strengths of each.

Table 1. University Leadership

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Leadership for Regional Engagement</i>
Michigan State University (MSU)	Assistant Provost for University Outreach and Engagement
Purdue University	President, Vice Provost for Engagement
University of Georgia (UGA)	Vice President of Public Service & Outreach, Associate Dean of Extension
University of Minnesota (UMN)	Faculty associated with the Institute for Sustainable Agriculture
University of Missouri (MU)	Extension Staff
Virginia Tech (VT)	Vice Provost for Outreach and International Affairs, Vice President of Information Technology

University leadership

Each of the universities studied engages university expertise across multiple departments and disciplines and has visibility at the senior administrative leadership level of the institution (see table 1). Based on the data gathered, it appears that the more senior the university leadership for distributed regional engagement, the more significant the institutional effort and impact.

At one end of the university leadership continuum is the University of Missouri's Extension Community Economic and Entrepreneurial Development (ExCEED) program. ExCEED is led by staff members in the Extension organization. This engagement approach involves university expertise across Extension-affiliated departments, but seems to be a predominantly staff-driven programmatic effort. Faculty and expertise from other parts of the university which could be relevant, such as business and economics, are absent. Most of the work of the partnership is done by citizens in the community with targeted injections of university expertise to address specific topics.

Next on the continuum is the University of Minnesota's Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships program, which was initiated by faculty members in agricultural and natural resources disciplines. Similar to the ExCEED program, this distributed regional engagement model is focused around a specific program approach. Although the range of expertise from the university is limited to the disciplines associated with the founding academic colleges and Extension organization, the level of involvement by faculty and students is relatively substantial.

In the middle of the continuum are Michigan State University (MSU), University of Georgia (UGA), and Virginia Tech (VT). Each of these institutions benefits from leadership at the vice provost or vice president level and has been successful in engaging

Table 2. The Engagement Agenda

<i>Partnership</i>	<i>Engagement Agenda</i>
Michigan State—Jackson, MI	Community capacity building
Purdue—Indiana (various)	Technology-driven business development
University of Georgia—Archway Partnerships, GA	Regional development priorities
University of Minnesota—Five Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships, MN	Sustainable development through civic engagement
University of Missouri—Five Extension Community Economic & Entrepreneurial Development regional partnerships, MO	Local asset-based economic development
Virginia Tech—South Central VA	Innovation economy infrastructure development

faculty across many colleges as well as staff (outreach, extension, other) in regional development. As a result, these regional engagement approaches address a wider breadth of community issues and opportunities, and thus have greater impact. The varying backgrounds of the vice provosts or vice presidents have shaped the emphasis on engagement in each of these institutions in different ways. At MSU, faculty scholarship is at the center. At UGA, collaboration between Public Service and Extension has defined the structure of the university's approach. At VT, information technology and distributed research has played heavily into an engagement strategy.

At the far end of the continuum is Purdue University, which is engaged in more regions, more state issues, and more economic development partnerships than any of the other institutions. Because of presidential leadership on statewide engagement, signals have been sent externally and internally indicating that the university is intimately interested in partnering to meet the state's needs. Purdue has partnered proactively and reactively with regions and regional issues across the state.

The engagement agenda

The focus of engagement, or the engagement agenda, has differed across the six institutional approaches (see table 2). Purdue and Virginia Tech approached distributed regional engagement by taking a somewhat vague regional vision or aspiration, then fleshing out a strategy and contributing tactical elements where they had appropriate expertise and resources. In both of these models, the regions wanted to increase their economic competitiveness through the development of high-tech assets that played to

regional strengths. The universities responded by suggesting strategies to assist the region in achieving its vision and contributing relevant resources.

In contrast, the University of Minnesota and the University of Missouri determined in advance the terms on which they were prepared to engage, based on support originating within the university. As a result, they framed program approaches to engagement, then empowered citizens in the partnering regions to determine what they wanted to accomplish through the partnership and how they would work with the university to achieve these ends.

The University of Georgia and Michigan State University initiated their engagements by partnering with regions to address specific issues associated with current community challenges. The universities assumed responsibility for matchmaking between various community organizations and institutional expertise. Michigan State worked over time to establish a partnering infrastructure that would secure a relationship commitment between the community and university and allow various needs and players on both sides of the partnership to enter and exit as their respective needs were met. The University of Georgia pursued a similar partnering approach.

University roles in regional partnerships

The six universities included in this study engaged faculty, students, and staff in various ways throughout their distributed regional partnerships (see table 3). No single institution employed all role opportunities, and the only particular university role that was employed by all institutions was offering outreach programs and services in the region. Each role had a place in advancing regional development.

Research conducted by visiting faculty and students (Michigan State, Purdue, University of Minnesota) addressed particular regional issues and faculty research interests, and provided temporary intellectual capital to a region. Somewhat in contrast, research conducted by faculty and students resident in the region (Virginia Tech) contributed to the development of new regional assets and permanent intellectual infrastructure. The assets and human capital provided the region with innovation economy advantages that, in turn, positioned it to compete more effectively.

Within a limited scope, distributed regional engagement strategies linked teaching and learning associated with academic programs to a broader regional development strategy. Student learning was linked to regional engagement from the perspective of involving on-campus students in regional course-related learning

Table 3. University Roles in Regional Partnerships

University Roles	MSU	Purdue	UGA	UMN	MU	VT
Campus-based faculty conduct research	x	x	x	x		
Regionally based faculty conduct research						x
Research by campus-based graduate students		x			x	x
Research by regionally based graduate students						x
Service-learning by undergraduates	x		x	x		
Academic programs in region		x				x
Outreach programs and services in region	x	x	x	x	x	x
Outreach staff liaison embedded in region			x			x
Integration of Extension personnel and activities	x	x	x	x	x	
Business development support infrastructure activities		x			x	x
IT infrastructure established						x
Leadership development in region	x		x	x	x	x
Social services support system enhancement in region	x		x			

activities at MSU, UGA, and UMN. This enriched student learning, often placing students in environments that were foreign to their life experience, contributed to broadening student perspectives as well as offering practical assistance to regions on issues of importance. In two of the six regional engagement models (Purdue, VT), learning opportunities in the form of academic programs were offered to residents of the regions and were associated with the broader economic development strategy in the regions.

Although outreach and extension were the historic interfaces between the land-grant universities studied and their respective communities, the roles of outreach and extension entities in distributed regional development varied widely across the six institutions. Two institutions in the study, the University of Georgia and Virginia Tech, chose to embed one or more outreach personnel in

Table 4. Role of Regional Partners

<i>Region(s)</i>	<i>Role of Regional Partner</i>
Jackson, Michigan	Identify community goals and vision, ensure appropriate community people are involved to meet goals, identify opportunities to engage university expertise, develop self-sufficiency
Indiana (various)	Identify site for technology park presence, develop economic vision, identify sector strategy and related workforce needs, partner with university to establish business incubator and related academic offerings
Moultrie/Colquitt, Georgia	Through executive committee, identify priorities, involve community, interface with university personnel to inform choices and develop options, make decisions
Minnesota (5 RSDP regions)	Through citizen boards, create vision, cultivate community support, and direct budget expenditures to subcontract with university for various research, education, and outreach activities
Missouri (5 ExCEED regions)	Organize regional coalitions, develop project goals, allocate grant funds to secure university expertise, conduct activities
Southside, Virginia	Develop vision, secure university commitment, partner with university to secure funding, provide facilities to house university presence

the partnering regions to serve in an interface capacity back to their respective universities. One might argue that this function could be served by a reenvisioned extension presence in regions, but that has not occurred in these institutions. The integration of extension into a broader regional development strategy in the institutions studied ranged from high at the University of Missouri, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Georgia to moderate at Michigan State University and Purdue University to very little at Virginia Tech.

The focus of university expertise in developing or enhancing various regional infrastructures varied across institutional engagement models. Purdue, Missouri, and Virginia Tech were each attuned to the need to assist regional partners in creating a support system to nurture new businesses. Virginia Tech, alone among the six universities studied, focused on regional technology infrastructure development. Nearly all the universities studied contributed to regional leadership development, typically targeted to particular populations (such as minority groups or community service organizations). Finally, Michigan State University and the University of Georgia focused attention on strengthening social services infrastructure.

The role of regional partners

The role of regional partners (table 4) was shaped in large part by the way the university approached partnering. The University of Missouri and the University of Minnesota determined that they wanted to engage with regions in their states through a programmatic interface that they shaped and took responsibility to seed fund. Their respective regional partners then worked within that programmatic framework to determine what they wanted to accomplish, how to engage university expertise, how to develop community support, what resources would be needed, how to secure additional resources beyond the seed funds, and how to spend the money. In this model, community partners were empowered to call upon the university for assistance, but only within the confines of the program parameters.

In contrast, Purdue and Virginia Tech decided that they were interested in engaging with regions to facilitate the development of a high-tech economic base. In these engagements, the regional partners took responsibility for developing a vision or articulating an aspiration associated with creating a new economic base, secured critical resources to facilitate a physical university presence in their regions, and left a lot of discretion to their university partners to determine what they would contribute and how that would be accomplished. This model runs the risk of creating unrealistic expectations about what impacts the university can have that will reposition the region economically. It also assumes that the decisions of leaders who work to bring the university into their regions will either be accepted by the grassroots of the community, or that their acceptance doesn't matter—both of which are dangerous positions for the university to face.

In between the program model (UMN and MU) and the create-a-high-tech-economy model (Purdue and VT) was the let's-meet-in-the-middle model that was employed by Michigan State University. This model offered an incremental approach to broad-based change by tackling particular issues where there was a match between regional need and faculty scholarship interest. A relationship was established such that entities associated with either side of the partnership could initiate a partnering project. The role of regional partners was to determine what they wanted to accomplish, engage in dialogue with appropriate university players about partnering, and decide together how to secure resources and assign responsibilities. Over time, a trust relationship was built such that the partners began to work toward a goal of community self-sufficiency. The disadvantage of this model is that community

change is incremental, in terms of breadth as well as timeframe. Interventions are dependent on the willingness and ability of individual faculty members to contribute.

The University of Georgia approach might be characterized as high regional empowerment. In this model, the university sets the stage by pushing the region to identify its top issues, organize a leadership group, engage community members in dialogue about issues and options, and make decisions about how to accomplish goals. The university's role is to facilitate community conversation, seed fund the relationship, and procure relevant expertise wherever it might be found. The downside of this model is that the issues and solutions selected by the region are more informed by current local perspectives than by new paradigms. Another concern is that, unlike the MSU model, faculty interests are not at the center of the partnering agenda, so deep faculty engagement may be more of a challenge.

Funding models

The funding models employed by the partnerships (table 5) offer important insights into public policy decisions. In three of the six engagement models, state money was appropriated for the specific purpose of supporting a university-regional partnership. Two states, Minnesota and Virginia, sent money directly to the regions and allowed them essentially to subcontract with their university partners for research, programs, services, and other expertise. This approach put money in the regions and had the effect of pulling the universities into those regions to spend the money.

Where the scale of money was most significant (Virginia), the scale of university commitment was greatest, and thus the opportunity for transformative impacts was highest. In Georgia, the money for partnering was appropriated inside the higher education system, and went to the university. It might be argued that money from the Georgia legislature to the regions at a higher order of investment would pull the university into the region in more significant ways than is currently the case.

The states of Michigan and Missouri have not made direct investments in university-regional engagement. The engagement that is occurring is driven completely by those institutions' commitment to external partnering and their willingness to carve seed funds out of their own budgets to stimulate relationship development. Again, one might ask how much more could be accomplished if the needy regions in those states received direct appropriations for the specific purpose of partnering.

Table 5. Funding Models

<i>Partnership</i>	<i>Source of Funds</i>
Michigan State—Jackson, MI	Competitive grants secured by community organizations and faculty members, respectively, to fund focused collaborative activities; roughly \$7 million total has flowed into the partnership.
Purdue—Indiana (various)	Local contributions of land, Purdue Research Foundation investments in technology park facilities, local responsibility for funding university engagement activities in region.
University of Georgia—Archway Partnerships, GA	University, through special Board of Regents allocation, funds 2/3rds of an embedded 1–2 person university presence in region and incidental expenses of partnership; region funds 1/3 of same; roughly \$120,000–\$150,000 per partnership annually is spent on embedded presence and incidental expenses; grants secured by community organizations and faculty members, respectively, to fund specific partnership activities.
University of Minnesota—Five Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships, MN	State Legislature allocates \$200,000 per region annually directly to each of the five regions; regions are expected to contribute matching funds; university supports its interface out of its Extension budget.
University of Missouri—Five Extension Community Economic & Entrepreneurial Development regional partnerships, MO	University Extension has funded partnerships through seed grants from its base budget; grants to regions average \$56,000 annually; regions obtain matching funds.
Virginia Tech—Southside, VA	Roughly \$80 million has flowed into partnership through a combination of VA Tobacco Commission funds (facilities and research equipment, seed administrative funding, limited research, seed educational programs), state line item appropriation (approximately \$6 million annually for staffing and operations), federal directed and competitive funds (research programs, outreach programs), and local private funds (start-up funds, furnishings and technology).

Another point related to several of these engagement models is the responsibility placed on regions to secure funds to support the work of the partnership. In the Virginia Tech and Purdue approaches, the region assumed significant responsibility for funding the relationship and directed investments to create a regional facility to house a university presence. In the University of Georgia and University of Missouri approaches, the region was required to commit to matching university-provided funds before the work of the partnership began. Requiring regional investments in partnering sends a message to regions that they have a responsibility to shape the work of the partnership at the outset and to remain committed to the partnership through the difficult times.

Table 6. Strengths of Engagement Approach

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Strengths</i>
Michigan State University (MSU)	Engagement infrastructure, faculty scholarship, regional self-sufficiency
Purdue University	Presidential leadership, statewide partnerships & relationships
University of Georgia (UGA)	Engagement agenda driven by regional leaders; student service-learning in regions; collaboration with state agencies and other higher education institutions
University of Minnesota (UMN)	Local empowerment for university research, education, and outreach investments in region; development of citizen leaders
University of Missouri (MU)	Stimulating rural economic self-sufficiency, entrepreneurship development and support
Virginia Tech (VT)	Holistic program model for regional development; attraction of financial investments; embedded faculty, graduate students, and staff in region

Strengths of engagement approach

Each of these pioneering distributed regional engagement efforts has notable strengths that commend it to others as a model (see table 6). Michigan State University's approach to establishing sustainable partnerships is to create a partnering infrastructure built on a relationship of trust between the region and the university that facilitates the coming and going of various individuals and organizations. Likewise, MSU's focus on involving faculty in regional issues through a focus on scholarship offers important considerations for engaging the heart of the academic enterprise. The work that MSU has done in Jackson, Michigan, to assist that community in achieving self-sufficiency begins to outline an "end game" that builds the long-term capacity of a region.

Purdue University has set an example of how to become a valued and trusted partner with the state as it tackles broad economic development challenges and agendas. While a president cannot alone make engagement happen, he or she can set a tone and position the institution to put a high priority on engagement. Rather than worry about being asked to do things that are not easy to do, Purdue has proactively asked communities across Indiana about their challenges and how the university can help. Between its relationships with key state government and business leaders, as well as with community leaders in regions spanning Indiana, Purdue has positioned itself as a champion of the public good.

The University of Georgia has implemented a very effective model of third-party-facilitated dialogue in communities that

empowers communities to take a big-picture look at their issues through prioritization, defining component elements, learning about options, and engaging the community in determining courses of action. UGA has considered how students can help communities address particular issues and has effectively employed service-learning opportunities to pull students (and faculty) into regional engagement. By putting regional interests at the center of their engagement relationship, UGA has laudably accepted responsibility for connecting appropriate expertise to the region even if that expertise exists outside the university.

The University of Minnesota has developed a very successful program model for regional engagement in large part because of its focus on local empowerment. Because the state sends special funds to the regions so they can partner with the university, core resources are available for regions to engage university expertise. In addition, the program model is structured to develop citizen leaders through a formalized regional board structure. Citizen boards practice what the university calls “in-reach” by reaching into the university for the expertise and type of engagement appropriate to address regional goals.

The University of Missouri is focused on the critical and compelling issue of rural economic viability. The university has cleverly offered seed funds to multijurisdictional coalitions that come together of their own volition to address rural self-sufficiency. The program’s focus on stimulating and supporting entrepreneurship focuses people on creating a locally owned economic engine that allows wealth to stay in the region.

Virginia Tech has piloted a model of “distributed research” that establishes scientific laboratories in a region, places scientists there to conduct applied research linked to local needs and opportunities, and builds programs, services, and infrastructure supports around that applied research. In this way, the seeds of a new employment base in the region are sown while a workforce with related competencies is simultaneously developed. This model attracts increasing financial investments as more regional assets are created, and attracts an increasing talent base as regional intellectual capital is built.

Institutional Perspectives on Distributed Engagement

The following section outlines the major findings from the first stage of research, as described in the methodology section. The

findings are organized thematically, and specifically address motivations for university engagement that occurs in geographies not proximate to the institution's campus, challenges associated with such engagement, the need for structuring win-win community-university relationships, tactical strategies for structuring engagement partnerships, and effective relationship development.

Motivations

According to Weerts (2005), one of the factors associated with effective two-way relationships between universities and communities is identifying motivators for engagement within the institution and the community. What motivates land-grant research universities to partner with regions of their states that are distant from campus? The underlying rationales range from pragmatic to personal.

Leaders of university engagement at land-grant institutions interviewed for this research project outlined a number of pragmatic reasons for their universities' investment in partnerships in other parts of their states. Securing and maintaining the favor and confidence of elected state

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officials and their voting constituencies by engaging with regions across the state was cited as a high priority. Also, engagement leaders indicated that scholarly research, education, and service agendas could be advanced by partnering with nonlocal regions of the state. Most of the chief engagement officers interviewed also noted their personal sense of responsibility to, and passion for, the land-grant mission with respect to serving the public good.

Challenges

Distributed regional engagement is not without its challenges, according to the university leaders interviewed. Political pressure, resource pressure, and sustained support were cited as the greatest barriers to more extensive university-regional engagement. Political pressure resulted from partisan politics, setting up delicate situations for universities not wishing to play to the interests of one party at the expense of the other. As Alter (2005, 480) has observed, “Public scholarship centers typically on important issues that affect

multiple interests or publics, each with differing, sometimes diametrically opposed perspectives on the issue at hand.”

Maintaining support for engagement partnerships over the long term was a challenge mentioned in several different contexts. The ability of institutions of higher education to institutionalize engagement depends on leadership, resources, and coordination of effort (*Vidal et al. 2002*). Support on campus to keep faculty energized about working in a region over a period of years was cited as a need. Integrating the activities of multiple faculty across multiple departments, schools, campuses, and sometimes institutions was mentioned by several as a concern. Maintaining support in the community or region “over a sufficiently long time to see change” presented another set of challenges and spoke to the need to define consistent and straightforward ways of measuring impacts of the partnership.

Structuring win-win partnerships

A theme that emerged across the conversations with senior engagement leaders at the land-grant institutions studied was the need to structure distributed regional engagement in ways that benefit both the university and the community. This finding was consistent with the Murrasse (*2001*) conclusion that the benefit a university receives from a partnership is related to the consistency between the goals of the partnership and the university’s mission. These joint wins sometimes occurred in a series of microbenefits, typified by various specific community needs addressed by various faculty research agendas. Joint wins also played out into larger opportunities that elevated the standing of the university and community with stakeholders. For the university, this sometimes meant an opportunity to enhance the institution’s political capital, and for the community, it sometimes meant a chance to increase its cachet beyond the region.

A second consideration in structuring win-win university-regional partnerships was in identifying up front what one vice president called the “rules of engagement.” Both Purdue and Virginia Tech indicated that they were willing to commit to large-scale partnerships but that doing so would require new money. The Indiana and Virginia regions interested in partnering with their respective land-grant universities did not expect the institutions to carve money out of their operating budgets to fund the partnerships. Each university’s primary contribution to regional partnerships was expertise and a willingness to work cooperatively with the region’s leadership to identify potential funding sources.

A third rule of engagement mentioned by Purdue was that the university did not work on a geopolitical basis. Purdue clearly saw itself as a state institution, and thus was unwilling to become involved in partnerships that pitted one political jurisdiction against another. The university favored regional partnerships that are inclusive, rather than divisive. A fourth rule of engagement offered by Michigan State was the need to connect community work with faculty scholarship because of faculty centrality to the core of the academic enterprise.

Tactical strategies for structuring partnerships

A variety of tactical strategies for effectively structuring university-regional partnerships were mentioned by interviewees. One tactical strategy was identifying at the outset whether or not the fit was right between community need and university expertise. Votruba (2005) recommends that universities “be careful to define who owns the problems,” cautioning against “assum(ing) ownership for community problems that are far beyond (universities’) capacity to resolve” (269). Outreach professionals at the University of Georgia working with communities considered whether particular issues were a good fit for expertise at their institution, and if not, looked to involve other institutions that might be better suited.

Setting appropriate expectations was a tactic mentioned by many of the interviewees. It was pointed out that this was especially important in dealing with deep economic and social issues expected to take considerable time and effort to mitigate, and which required the community to invest itself in being part of the solution. Embedded in the strategy of helping people to help themselves was the importance of crafting engagement approaches that were tailored to the particular circumstances of the environment in which they were employed. Corrigan (2000, 15) goes so far as to suggest that programs cannot be successfully replicated en masse; rather, they must “emerge from the cultural setting in which they will operate.” Minnesota, Missouri, and Georgia each established regional partnerships based on an expectation of engaging around a community-driven agenda.

Another tactical strategy employed was documenting the expectations associated with each partner. This supports the contention of Corrigan (2000, 191) that “memorandums of agreement must formalize the process and clearly state commitments of each of the partners.” Both Michigan State and Georgia mentioned their use of written agreements to define roles and responsibilities.

Relationship development

A final theme relating to structuring partnerships externally focused on relationship development. Three aspects of relationship development considerations emerged: getting the right people at the table, developing trust, and establishing regularized communication. Getting the right people at the table, as described by some interviewees, meant ensuring diversity, grassroots involvement, and broad representation from

“Getting the right people at the table . . . meant ensuring diversity, grassroots involvement, and broad representation from the community.”

the community. From the university side of the partnership, according to Virginia Tech and the University of Georgia, was the importance of placing the right university people in the community to guide the partnership efforts. These experiences dovetail with an earlier finding that a key factor of success in regional partnerships are “animateurs” who serve as “gate keepers” between the critical

players in the engagement partnership network (*Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development 1999*).

Michigan State’s focus on developing the infrastructure of a long-term relationship between community and university was facilitated by building a sufficient level of trust: “Issues that are going to be essential for success are: Do we trust each other? Are we committed to each other? Are we going to stick around when times get tough?” (*Fitzgerald 2007*). Regular communication within the partnerships associated with the University of Georgia and Purdue was cited as an important factor in keeping the goals in front of everyone, assessing progress against the goals, prioritizing current needs, and quantifying results.

Conclusions

Is distributed regional engagement an idea whose time has come? Evidence points to the need and opportunity for much more significant involvement by universities in regional economic and social challenges. The data demonstrate that several land-grant institutions are exploring more comprehensive strategies of engagement, but have few roadmaps or models to guide them. This article has presented information on how several land-grant universities are approaching distributed regional engagement to advance the well-being of citizens and communities in those regions.

If universities are going to be involved externally with communities, through research, public service, and student service-learning, there is an opportunity to align the goals of the university faculty and staff capable of delivering these programs and services with the needs of a region rather than just pursuing a scattershot approach. Key to the successful approaches was grounding the engagement in understanding the region's needs and instituting a strong linking structure to match those needs with university interests. This approach supports Lester's (2005) advice that universities should "align their own contributions with what is actually happening in the local community" (3).

A critical need in regions as well as in universities is the emergence of leaders who understand the value of partnering with the other entity (universities with regions, regions with universities) and the relationship between assets each can contribute and needs each can meet through the partnership. University leaders who established successful regional partnerships also understood the importance of ensuring parity between institutional mission and goals of the partnership, which is consistent with the findings of Vidal et al. (2002). Outreach and engagement leaders at the institutions studied clearly were able to shape their institutions' engagement in ways that complemented and reinforced the mission of the universities.

The breadth of engagement activities reflected in each of the partnerships studied was possible because long-standing relationships were established between the universities and their respective regions, allowing many projects and players to be a part of the engagement over time. Wilson (2004) and Reindl (2005) have stated that the institutionalization of engagement is based in a long-term relationship. Regions may be able to solve the problems of today with the influx of temporary intellectual capital from universities. But they are not likely to develop sustainable innovation economy competency without a long-term university partnership. This principle points to the need for universities to consider how they can and are prepared to create long-term relationships with regions that install innovation economy assets there.

Whether the money for regional infrastructure to house university personnel and activities comes from the state or not, a question in university-regional partnerships will be who should assume primary responsibility for securing funding and owning the infrastructure. The examples in this article illustrate a range of funding sources for engagement and a variety of roles and responsibilities assumed for acquiring funding and directing partnership

investments. Local policy that is innovative and entrepreneurial in creating the conditions for university engagement assists a region in attracting the interest of a research university.

The work of distributed regional engagement is difficult. There are not many guideposts to help universities or regions chart a straightforward path. Understanding what is working and why is important to the expansion of this concept. Each of the six pioneers included in this study offers important lessons about distributed regional engagement. To the extent that this analysis is helpful to others who choose to engage in distributed regional partnerships, it may shorten the planning period and improve the likelihood of success.

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